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Thomas J. Sugrue, *Not even Past. Barack Obama and the Burden of Race.*

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Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. 165. (Lawrence Stone Lectures).
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- 1 With the title “Not even Past,” historian and sociologist Thomas J. Sugrue alludes to a motto used by Barack Obama in his most famous speech “A more perfect union,” held in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, when, pressured by the uproar around the sermons of his pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, he positioned himself with regard to race. Obama himself borrowed the phrase from William Faulkner, who wrote “The past is not dead. In fact, it’s not even past.” The title also serves as an apt banner for the three erudite and well-researched essays that Sugrue brings together here, with as their central problematic Obama’s positioning with regard to “the most important social and political movement in modern American history: the struggle for civil rights, black power and racial equality” (3) and, even more ambitiously, his positioning “in the context of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American politics, intellectual life, culture and society” (5). Throughout the text, that spirals outward in its focus and concerns from the personal to the local to the national, Sugrue makes the impossible tensions, the suffocating series of double binds, that Obama is labouring under abundantly clear. Sugrue’s challenge, to make a convincing argument as to why Obama was eventually able to politically appeal to a widely divergent electorate, is amply met, but he manages to do so at the expense of a more complicated, intersectional reading of race.

- 2 In a kaleidoscopic journey, the first chapter, “‘This is my Story’: Obama, Civil Rights, and Memory,” Obama is read in the context of the legacy of the civil rights movement. Following him in his personal and political journey from Hawaii to the White House, Sugrue analyses Obama with regard to the key figures Moses and Joshua, who stand for the symbolically laden, biblically inspired configurations, representing different generations and different ideological and political styles in the black community. With the aim of nation building and transcending the old divisions of race, ethnicity, religion and party, as the major theme of his campaign, Obama positioned himself, at the end of the day, as the heir to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But this was a version of King, that had since the beginning of the eighties been whitewashed, domesticated and made widely acceptable, robbing St. Martin of his radical politics, which invoked the eradication of the “giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism” (50), that characterized him at the end of his life. Ultimately, according to Sugrue, Obama’s genius resides in fashioning a personal story that dovetails perfectly with the national story of unity, equality and progress.
- 3 In chapter II, “Obama and the truly Disadvantaged: The Politics of Race and Class,” the influence of Chicago on Obama is foregrounded. Chicago’s economic ups and downs are outlined as the young community organizer who reached out to its black disenfranchised classes experienced them, while the influence of the University of Chicago’s sociology’s department, with its notable figure William Julius Wilson, on the later professor of constitutional law is also pinpointed. Wilson’s second book, “The Truly Disadvantaged” (1987) gave Obama several of his later articles of faith: the perception of a wide gap between the black middle class, who had left the urban neighbourhoods they once had helped to sustain, and the poor, who were left without role models and without buffers to ward off economic vicissitudes. In addition, Obama was strongly interpellated by Wilson’s argument for interracial coalition building around a politics of class, which became a central theme in his political vision (79). The patchwork quilt of social politics that Obama had built up by 2008, also included a Christian, moral call for self-discipline, individual responsibility and uplift directed specifically at male African Americans, which appealed to conservative whites. It was a synthesis which had appeal to left, center and right; poor and (to a lesser extent) rich, and to blacks and whites alike (91).
- 4 In the final, most ambitious, chapter, “‘A more perfect Union’? The Burden of Race in Obama’s America,” Sugrue returns to Chicago, this time as the city near the top of the list of most segregated American cities and as the top destination for immigrants from Latin America and Asia, and extrapolates from there to the entire nation, focusing mainly on patterns in housing, education and health. Sugrue deftly shows the presence of five overarching configurations in the contemporary U.S.A. with regard to race: a historically specific postracial framework, a broadly accepted framework of color blindness (deeply appealing to whites), a deeply rooted racial consciousness among African Americans, a white identity politics that dares not speak its name and a sensibility toward racial hybridity that shapes the worldview of many new immigrants and young white and black Americans (96). Foregrounding sociologist Bonilla Silva’s concept of ‘racism without racists,’ Sugrue meticulously shows how change has been slowest for immigrants of African descent - e.g. from Liberia, Senegal, Haiti, Dominican Republic- and for African Americans (99), leaving those groups at the bottom of the deck, and pointing to historically deep seated patterns of racialization. Obama’s asymmetrical manoeuvring in the face of the five racial configurations is shown clearly in the acclaim he reaped among

whites when chastising African American men to shape up and the white furor he raises, whenever he pronounces on white backlash. Any breach with the dominant color blind discourse, when it comes to whites, has to be nipped in the bud, but he is given sheer unlimited space, when calling African Americans to task. The tensions overshadowing Obama's manoeuvring room are daunting, yet so far he has shown in his policies that he has got the stuff to withstand many of the pressures.

- 5 The three essays are illuminating, well argued and researched, clearly written from a sympathizing perspective on Obama, while not failing to be critical of him, when it is warranted. My only quarrel with Sugrue is, first, that he conceptualizes "race" in a very limited way: predominantly as blackness – whereby whiteness is inadvertently naturalized. Second, the co-constructedness of race with other social and symbolical axes of signification, notably gender, is too often disregarded. Thus, the riveting spectacle during the Democratic primaries between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, which invoked race and gender simultaneously, but differently, for each of them, would have necessitated a more inclusive and complicated understanding of race and gender (see for instance Eisenstein 2009, Alexander, Lewis and Wekker 2010). Strangely underdeveloped as well in Sugrue's analysis, next to the figures of Moses and Joshua, is the figure of Miriam, who is only mentioned, thus allowing for the unwarranted and continued naturalizing of male gender, that has been so silently but forcefully privileged in American (or any national) politics so far. I would venture that many problematics broached in the book would have benefited from a more complicated, intersectional understanding of race, which would have resulted in a further defamiliarizing of the familiar.

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